

NON-CONCEPTUALISM AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE CONCEPTUALIST ON THE COGNITIVE PROCESS OF PERCEPTION

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Abstract

*The idea that our perceptual experience is more detailed than what concepts we possess informs the idea of non-conceptualism in perception. Gareth Evans was the first to make this point in *The Varieties of Reference*. Christopher Peacocke's famous autonomy thesis, otherwise known as autonomy principle, further buttresses Evans' argument. It states that it is possible for a creature to be in states with non-conceptual content even though that creature possesses no conceptual ability at all. The idea of non-conceptual content of perceptual experience had since then been generating serious polemics among philosophers of perception. The non-conceptualist claims that creatures without conceptual ability can be in a content-bearing state (non-conceptual state) since they do not possess concept, memory or linguistic ability. Concepts are considered to be constituents of those intentional contents that can be the complete truth-evaluable contents of judgment and belief. This paper shall examine the possibility of non-conceptual content in human perception and consider the complementarity of conceptualism and non-conceptualism as a more viable basis for explaining human perception. This synthesis, the paper suggests, overcomes the epistemological deficiencies inherent in any unilateral approach to understanding the nature, character and process of cognition thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the human cognitive process.*

(Key Words: Complementarity, Autonomy Thesis, Conceptualist Process).

INTRODUCTION

The idea that our perceptual experience is more detailed than what concepts we possess informs the idea of non-conceptualism in perception. Gareth Evans was the first to react against the traditional belief in *The Varieties of Reference* that

perception is conceptually derived from experience and ever since, this position has continually generating serious polemics among philosophers of perception (Evans, 1982:88). With Christopher Peacocke's famous autonomy thesis, otherwise known as autonomy principle, this debate was further brought to the fore in philosophical discourses. Peacocke argues that it is possible for a creature to be in states with non-conceptual content even though that creature possesses no conceptual ability at all. The non-conceptualist position has been that creatures without conceptual ability can be in a content-bearing state when they perceive the world but because they lack concept, memory or linguistic ability, such content can only be described as non-conceptual. The conceptualist insists that since concepts are constituents of those intentional contents that are complete truth-evaluable contents of judgment and belief, they must be recognitional and affirmable as knowledge, hence, cannot be taken as non-conceptual. We intend to examine the possibility of non-conceptual content in human perception and considered the complimentarism of conceptualism and non-conceptualism as a more viable basis for explaining human perception. This synthesis, we believe, shall overcome the epistemological deficiencies inherent in any unilateral approach to understanding the nature, character and process of cognition thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the human cognitive process.

THE CONCEPTUALIST AND PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE

The conceptualist conceives conceptual content as that kind which can be ascribed to judgment and belief which conforms to Frege's criterion of identity for *sense* and *reference*. Concepts are understood in this sense as constituent of that intentional content that can be the complete truth-evaluable component of judgment and belief. The conceptualist holds that any experience which cannot explain its close connection with belief should be rejected and that since all representational content of experience are describable, then they are structurally conceptual. They claim there is nothing like non-conceptual content because even though the phenomenon for whose description has been taking as such still invokes concepts of some perceptual-demonstrative or what is recognitional in perception. If the least of human experience is describable as "that shade," the conceptualist claims, it is enough to satisfy the need for conceptualization and cognition. But, is this description enough for knowledge claim?

John McDowell (1994) used to be the strongest and the most provocative advocate of conceptualism. He conceives perceptual experience as a strict conceptual achievement. He argues that any experience that cannot be subsumed under concept, whether as belief or judgment, is not genuine and cannot be relevant to perception. To him, all forms of experiences are intentionally driven and belief-directed. For this reason, he cannot imagine any experience devoid of concept or belief. In this sense he agrees with Kekes that "all perception is theory bound" (Kekes, 1977: 89).

He claims, “nothing can simply be a reason for a belief except another... belief” and that “only belief bequeath belief” (Kekes, 1977: 89). If this holds, then how does belief get started?

McDowell endorses the fundamental rationalists’ insight which suggests that to be aware of something in the sense that such awareness can serve as evidence for beliefs amounting to knowledge is to bring it under a concept. This has also been the argument for Hamlyn in “Perception, Sensation and Non-conceptual Content” (Hamlyn, 1994: 142). Since the process of judgment does not introduce a new kind of content while perceiving, McDowell contends non-conceptuality. He argues that experience only endorses conceptual content or parts of it and that only upon it experiences are grounded (McDowell, 1994:63). But we know that experience is more fine-grained than the concepts, beliefs and judgments we have. How then can concepts be spontaneously derived from experience? It is not at all times that our experiences are fully endorsed by our beliefs and judgments because these give understanding to our experiences.

A careful reading of McDowell reveals that he sometimes conflates conceptuality with non-conceptuality. He at times gives the impression that the content of perceptual experience is totally conceptually structured and at another time, he gives the impression that it is partly non-conceptual and as such not relevant to perception. He admits that there are two kinds of beliefs acquired non-inferentially: that of reliable disposition to responding differently to stimuli or reporting elements of the causal chain which culminates in the report; and two, by mere non-inferential observation (Wright, 2003). In genuine perception, he argues that belief is the result of endorsing the content of a perceptual experience but in mere observation, belief is acquired blindly. He claims that under a correct circumstance, the perceiver spontaneously finds himself in a belief situation; a formation of fact not immediately visible but generally perceptible (Wright, 2003). Although these beliefs are non-inferentially elicited from the believer by environmental stimuli, the warrant for those beliefs is in an important sense inferential. The believer’s justification for beliefs of this sort depends on drawing conclusions from an antecedent claim of reliability.

Sometimes, a reporter suspects his reliability under certain conditions of observation and reports his disposition of something being x while withholding his endorsement of that claim, by saying only that it looks or appears x. McDowell reacts to this by making a distinction between the report of appearance and the actual report of perceptual experience. He holds that the capacity to have perceptual experience is different from and more fundamental than the capacity to make non-inferential observation. He claims that unless we could have perceptual experience, we could not make any observation. Even at this, we can still argue that not all observations of state of affairs involve perceptual experience of those states of affairs. The capacity to become non-inferentially informed about the world by learning blindly to respond differentially to it depends upon a more basic capacity for states of affairs to become

immediately apparent in perception. But, is it not important for McDowell to explain what a notion of conceptually structured observation is like? He argues that without the notion of a conceptually articulated perceptual experience which distinguishes genuine perception from a mere responsively acquired non-inferential belief, we cannot understand the empirical content of our claim.

McDowell does not construe perceptual experience as something involving the sort of endorsement characteristic of judging or believing but of content that is *judgeable* and *believable* itself. So, when a perceiver advances from perceptual experience to judgment or belief, the experience only serves in the capacity of justifying the resulting commitment, no more no less. This signifies McDowell's endorsement of the Fregean approach, which construes facts as true thought: 'thoughts' not in the psychological sense of thinking, but in the semantic sense of the contents that are thought or that which is thinkable. This argument seems to rule out the possibility of perceptual mistakes. But, we know that we sometimes cannot tell the difference between the cases in which we are having a perceptual experience whose content matches with reality and that which does not.

Traditionally, this argument has been criticized by the famous "Argument from Illusion" where the perceiver has the same perceptual content for both the veridical and the non-veridical cases in perception. McDowell's objection to making distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content is not epistemological but rather semantic. His doctrine of semantic empiricism only shows that if we can make it a feature of our thought and talk intelligible for perceptual experience, then we can make it intelligible for any claim or belief. For him, the only thing a veridical perceptual experience and a corresponding hallucination have in common is that their subject cannot tell them apart but there is no need separating them.

McDowell says perceptual experience is 'immediate' in the same sense that conceptual abilities are, so, he saw no reason for making any distinction between them. He claims that concepts are spontaneously derived in perception and that the conceptual content for making judgment by inference is the same as the perceptual content of the experience. He argues that the only visible difference lies in the wrong application of concepts when we express them in language. But, we also know that the ways in which concepts are acquired in perception are gradual and they sometimes fall short of our judgment and belief. There are occasions when we lack the confidence to endorse knowledge about our experience as it is presented to us.

McDowell claims that to be aware of something is just to apply concepts to it, which means to make a judgment or undertake a belief commitment regarding it. Awareness deserves to be called "immediate" just in case it is not the product of a process of inference. Therefore, beliefs acquired non-inferentially, especially through the exercise of reliable dispositions to respond differently to stimuli of a certain sort, is yet conceptual even though it embodies immediate awareness of the items reported.

It is only in the sense of an ‘immediate awareness’ he admits that we can understand the knowledge of the perceptual experience around us.

A reliable non-inferential response to events does not necessarily mean that one has concepts of such events. Observational/non-inferential knowledge should be distinguished from cases of genuine perceptual knowledge. What McDowell often refers to as knowledge derived from perception can be classified under observational knowledge. But, there are occasions when we see colors or shapes which we have perceptual experience corresponding to the judgment from which we can go on to make or form beliefs without having genuine knowledge about. We sometimes respond blindly and still trust such blind responses only to discover later our mistake.

Bill Brewer, also a conceptualist, claims that “perceptual experiences justify beliefs” and as such “sense experiential states provide reasons for empirical beliefs” (Brewer, 2004: 89). He conceives perceptual experience as that with rational relations to judgment and beliefs to the extent that its spontaneity is already implied in its reception. This argument only applies if we understand experience as conceptually structured in the sense McDowell conceives it (McDowell, 1994: 62). N. Sellars also conceives concepts as the sole responsibility of the correct use of words (Sellars, 1973). For her, having concept involves mastering the use of words. Therefore, if a word is properly used, it is believed that one has the concept. So, for Sellars, no one can understand the concept ‘red’ unless he knows what it is for things to look ‘red’ and make appropriate use of the word.

THE NON-CONCEPTUALIST AND PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE

The non-conceptualist holds that it is possible to have a non-conceptual content in perception and that such content is representationally significant, that is, meaningful in the ‘semantic’ sense of describing or referring to states-of-affairs, properties, or individuals of some sort. In a more precise sense, non-conceptualism claims that there are cognitive capacities which are not determined (or at least not fully determined) by conceptual capacities and that the cognitive capacities which outstrip conceptual capacities can be possessed by rational and non-rational animals alike, whether human or non-human. Cognitive content in the perceptual sense is mental representational content, whether object-directed (intentionality) or self-directed (reflexivity). And for every type of cognitive content there is a corresponding cognitive capacity by means of which a creature generates, possesses, and deploys that content. They claim that one can have an experience with representational content R without possessing any of the concepts which figure in a proper description of R or that an experiencing subject need not to possess any of the concepts which perception theorists would describe as a correct condition of experience (Wright, 2003:2). Some of the perception theorists who have recently adopted this notion include Fred

Dretske, Gareth Evans, Christopher Peacocke and Michael Tyre (Dretske, 1995; Evans 1982; Peacocke, 1991: 495-504; Tye, 1995).

There are two varieties of non-conceptual positions: those who claim that the representational content of experience can be entirely non-conceptual, a position held by Evans (Evans, 1982:39) and those who hold that the representational content of experience can both have conceptual and non-conceptual properties, a position held by Peacocke (Peacocke, 1992:77). Another possible position is also open to those who claim that not only can experience have a non-conceptual content, but that there is also the possibility of a non-conceptual non-representational content of experience (Peacocke will still fall within this group).

The general argument of the non-conceptualist is that it is possible for a thinker to represent his experience of the world non-conceptually. Gareth Evans was the pioneering philosopher in this direction. He argues that perceptual experience can have a non-conceptual content as its constituent. In establishing this, he made a distinction between informational state and judgment. From this distinction, experience can be separated from judgment and belief. He states:

When a person receives something, he receives (or, better, gathers) information about the world... People are, in short and among other things, gatherers, transmitters and storers of information. These platitudes locate perception, communication, and memory in a system (informational system), which constitutes the substratum of our lives (Evans, 1982:122).

He argues that our contact with the external world only provides us with information conglomerating into concepts, communication, memory and perception. He developed the idea that the information yielded by our perceptual systems (including somatic proprioception) is non-conceptual. This (non-conceptual information), he argues, is initially unconscious but becomes conscious when it serves as input to a thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system (Evans, 1982:122).

Even though Evans is not too clear on whether perceptual states with non-conceptual content occur at the personal or sub-personal level, he maintained that the subject's conceptual abilities are brought to bear on them before concepts are formed. Today, it seems Evan's conception of non-conceptual content is antithetical to what recent philosophers of perception take it to mean. Most contemporary discussions of non-conceptual content are at the personal-level despite the fact that Evans discussed it most at the unconscious/sub-personal level (Evans, 1982:124). However, what is of importance to philosophers of perception today is the fact that the world could be represented in such a way that it could be independent of the thinker's conceptual capacities.

Dretske, like Evans, argues that the non-conceptual cognitive capacities are “sub-rational” or “non-rational” capacities necessary for cognition but not sufficient for our rational cognitive capacities. In other words, non-conceptual content does not exclude rationality: on the contrary, non-conceptual cognition and its content constitute the proto-rationality of all minded human or non-human animals (Dretske, 1969: 29). This contradicts the conceptualist position which holds that non-conceptual content neither exists nor is representationally significant. Not all cognitive capacities are fully determined by conceptual capacities in perception and none of the cognitive capacities of rational human animals can also be possessed by non-rational animals, whether human or non-human. So, the position of the conceptualist cannot hold. The idea of non-conceptuality in perception became more substantive when the perception theorist, Tim Crane, discovers an unusual experience in the waterfall illusion (Crane 1988: 142-147). In the waterfall illusion, the after-image of the waterfall produces a contradictory appearance of something moving and yet remaining still. If the content of perceptual experience represents the true characterization of what is seen, then it cannot be contradictory. For if it is contradictory, it means that our experience is independent of the concept we form about it. For example, we know that something cannot be F and not-F at the same time or something cannot be both red and green. The discovery of the waterfall illusion raises suspicion as to whether what is experienced is limited to what concepts we possess or not.

Adopting the Priority Principle which states that “only language users can possess concepts”, Bermudez argues that non-linguistic thoughts can only be thoughts with non-conceptual content. Therefore, human infants and animals’ experience of the world can only be non-conceptual because they are not language users; they lack the necessary conceptual capacities to describe their experiences. The conceptual capacity found in human infants in expressing their feelings is not matured enough to claim adequate knowledge and understanding of their experience and cannot be conceptual; these are mere intuitional expression not different from what obtains in animals. Even though the cry for hunger of an infant could be classified as a non-verbal communication, it is still an intuitive reaction not different from animal instinctive intuition. However, Bermudez defines non-conceptual content as “one that can be ascribed to a thinker without that thinker having to possess concepts required specifying that content” (Bermúdez, 1998:61). Experiences are better described by the constituent of their content; therefore, perceptual content without concepts should be described non-conceptual. Holding this view, it will mean that Kant’s ‘intuition without concept’ which he claims is blind will also be non-conceptual.

Bermudez argues that no creature, apart from those who have mastered the semantics of the first-person pronoun, can possess the capacity to think thoughts with first-person contents, which is characteristic of self-consciousness. By this, concepts are strictly tied to self-consciousness and linguistic abilities. Then, how do we describe the experience of animals and human infants who are not self-conscious of

their experiences? The Autonomy Principle states that “it is possible for a creature to be in a state with non-conceptual content even though that creature possesses no concept at all” (Bermudez, vol. 9, 1994: 429). This puts us in the dilemma of either denying that infants have the sorts of representational states that explain many surprisingly complex kinds of behaviors they are demonstrably capable of or ascribing to them mastery of concepts they could not possibly demonstrate. If we have to escape this dilemma and

do justice to both the differences and similarities between infant and adult cognition, then we will have to recognize the existence of states that represent the world in a way that is independent of concept mastery and, more so, that can be ascribed to creatures who possess no concept whatsoever (Bermúdez,1998:132).

Although Bermudez is careful in distinguishing constitutive from developmental issues, he clearly thinks that there is a connection between the two. He takes facts about cognitive development concerning the precursors of full-fledged self-consciousness to be strong evidence, not just for ontogenetic but for constitutive claims. In other words, he believes that conceptualization and cognition are achieved through developmental stages from infancy to adulthood. He states that

plausible developmental progression from the cognitive skills and abilities that normal human infants have available to them at birth are via the relevant forms of non-conceptual self-consciousness which later graduates into linguistic mastery of the first-person pronoun (Bermúdez,1998:112).

With regard to the developmental stages in human, Bermudez argues that non-conceptual self-consciousness begins at infancy with somatic proprioception and matures when the child begins to pick up some self-specifying information in exteroceptive perception. So, a relatively impoverished conception of the environment may affect the visual perception and somatic proprioception of the child. It is on this background that Bermudez claims that, “the building-blocks for the bootstrapping process that will eventually result in the mastery of the first-person concept and the capacity for full-fledged self-consciousness is well richer than the conceptions of the environment” (Bermúdez,1998:164).

Somatic proprioception (a nerve-ending sensation in the human body) provides information about the state of the body at a particular location relatively to the other parts of the body. Importantly, these are pieces of “self-specifying information.” Somatic proprioception provides information on the perceiver’s movements indicating that “the self has a place in the content of visual experience” (Bermúdez, 1998:273). Self-specifying information is also provided in how a perceiver views objects in relation to their own action and the sense of touch “because

it is simultaneously proprioception and exteroception which provides an interface between the self and the non-self” (Bermúdez, 1998: 43).

Bermudez traced the route of non-conceptuality to the state of infancy in human. At this stage, experience is non-conceptual to an infant child. But, as the child grows, relates and becomes aware of the environment, he gathers and acquires concepts gradually. He states that concepts acquisition “involves taking a particular route through the environment in such a way that one’s perception of the world is informed by awareness that one is taking such a route” (Bermúdez, 1998: 43). In view of this, Bermudez postulates the “Thought Language Principle” which comprises two parts, the “Conceptual Requirement Principle” and “Priority Principle.” The Conceptual Requirement Principle reveals that the range of contents that one may attribute to a creature is determined by the concepts the creature possesses, while the Priority Principle holds that conceptual abilities are constitutively linked with linguistic abilities in such a way that conceptual abilities cannot be possessed by non-linguistic creatures.

Bermudez later rejects the Conceptual Requirement Principle in favor of the Priority Principle on the ground that the latter allows for a clear distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual modes of content-bearing representation more than the former. This is evident in the consideration of the connection between language and concepts which gives us a clear criterion for identifying the presence of conceptual representation. To suppose that linguistic abilities are necessary for conceptual abilities is to deny that even the most advanced apes do not possess concepts but experiment has shown that apes and chimpanzees do at least recognize their kinds even though they lack necessary sophistication of conceptual capacity like humans. In truth, not all concepts can the mastery of language sufficiently describe at every instance of human development, it will depend on the conceptual development of the perceiver’s mind. If this is the case, then it will be wrong to assume “sensing that p” as meaning the same thing as “thinking that p.” There is a gulf of difference between “feeling/sensing an object” and “thinking about it.”

CONCLUSION

Having examined the arguments of both the conceptualist and the non-conceptualist, it becomes clear that consenting to the possibility of demonstrative concept does not hinder the possibility of non-conceptual content in perception. The two positions are not as divergent as they seem to be, their differences are not of kind and not of degree. Their differences can then be reduced to that of semantics. If only we can resolve the semantic ambiguities of their arguments, the problem dissolves.

Conceding theoretical recognition to non-conceptuality is implicitly an admittance of it in the human cognitive process of perception. One of the arguments

of the non-conceptualist is that concepts are derived from the vast non-conceptual repertoire of experience prior to language, beliefs and judgments.

If McDowell could grant theoretical recognition (McDowell, 2000:1) to some perceptual experiences devoid of judgments, then it should not be too costly for him to further accept non-conceptuality as part of the cognitive process. The admittance of such a commitment would have being the first sign of reconciling the two opposing camps. He admits that there is really an aspect of our perceptual experience that is not immediately subsumable by the human conceptual ability, yet, he stops short of going further to give his consent to non-conceptuality. The introduction of demonstrative thoughts/concepts by McDowell obstructs what should have been a straightforward compromise between the conceptualist and the non-conceptualist. However, if our argument could show that these basic concepts in demonstrative thought do not really serve the purpose intended for, then, the differences are dissolved.

The perceptual demonstrative thought is faced with the challenge of a fleeting nature and anything that would carry a genuine conceptual capacity should not be of such character, hence, cannot be cited as an instance of knowledge or proper conceptualization. McDowell himself admits that the capacity for recognizing perceptual demonstrative thought is “short-lived”. He asserts, “the very same capacity to embrace a colour in mind can persist beyond the duration of the experience itself ... if only for a short time (McDowell, 2000:1). If this capacity only endures for a short time, then, it is not sufficient for a recognition or knowledge.

Concepts are acquired gradually and conceptual capacity develops as experience accumulates. As the subject acquires experiences, the horizon of his conceptual capacity rises and gradually the conceptual capacity develops: experience is not spontaneously and immediately captured in perception. There is always a leftover. In fact, the act of conceptualization follows a gradual process. As human experience accumulates, concepts derived form a building blocks for the subject and this further enhances his/her ability to conceptualize other experiences. So, at every instance of perception there is every possibility of non-conceptuality forming basis of cognition.

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